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ABSTRACT

Group density (the extent of anticipated or actual interaction between group members independent of the subject) may be a situational antecedent of paranoid behavior. Members of a high density group can discuss others in their absence, and the potential for criticism and restricted privacy is greater than in a low density group where fewer communication channels exist. To test the prediction that under evaluative circumstances, a high density group would be more likely to promote paranoid behavior than a low density group, male subjects were tested in 6 groups of 10 in high or low density conditions. Subjects were told that evaluations of each person's self-disclosures would be used to exclude two subjects from a group problem. High density subjects expected other group members to discuss and evaluate them in their absence, while low density subjects expected to be present for all discussions between group members. Prior to the expected evaluations, measures associated with paranoid behavior (defensiveness, anxiety, self-disclosure, and projection) were administered. The results indicated a significant overall effect for density. High density subjects scored higher in anxiety, projection, and guardedness concerning self-disclosure than low density subjects. Differences in defensiveness were nonsignificant. (Author/PAS)

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THE EFFECT OF GROUP DENSITY ON PARANOID BEHAVIOR

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Minneapolis, MN, May 6-8, 1982.

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Abstract

The Effect of Group Density on Paranoid Benavior

Marcie Berman and Walter Katkovsky

The present research investigated group density, i.e., the extent of anticipated or actual interaction between group members independent of the subject, as a situational antecedent of paranoid behavior. Since members of a high density group can discuss others in their absence, the potential for criticism and restricted privacy is greater than in a low density group where fewer communication channels exist. It was predicted that under evaluative circumstances, a high density group would be more likely to promote paranoid behavior than a low density group. Male subjects were tested in six groups of 10 in high or low density conditions. Subjects were told that evaluations of each person's self-disclosures would be used to exclude two subjects from a group problem. High density subjects expected other group members to discuss and evaluate them in their absence, while low density subjects expected to be present for all discussions between group members. Prior to the expected evaluations, measures associated with paranoid behavior (defensiveness, anxiety, self-disclosure, and projection) were administered. The results indicated a significant overall effect for density. High density subjects scored higher in anxiety, projection, and guardedness concerning self-disclosure than low density subjects. Differences in defensiveness were nonsignificant.

The Effect of Group Density on Paranoid Behavior

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Introduction

Paranoid behavior typically involves increased attentiveness to the potential malevolence of other people, leading several authors to suggest the social setting as an area of major significance in the study of paranoid behavior (Cameron, 1959; Lemert, 1962; Ullmann & Krasner, 1975). However, the social situational antecedents of paranoid reactions have not been studied systematically. A social network model which attempts to explain social influences on individual adaptation can be useful in conceptualizing the social situational antecedents of paranoid thinking. One structural characteristic of a person's social network that has been associated with individual functioning is social density, i.e., the extent to which people known by a particular individual know and meet with one another independently of that individual (Bott, 1957). The greater the number of separate relationships between persons known by an individual, the higher the density of that person's social network.

Several researchers (e.g., Caplan, 1974) have suggested that highly dense social networks are more effective than low density networks in reducing the likelihood of dysfunctional behavior because in the high density group, members share a sense of community. In the event of a crisis they can quickly spread the word that a troubled individual needs help and provide support and

assistance. A contrasting position suggests that under high density conditions, individuals may feel constrained or entrapped by their network's expectations. When under stress, they may withdraw or respond in a pathologically defensive way because of intrusions on personal privacy and actual or expected criticisms that can occur with or without their knowledge (Brown, Birley, & Wing, 1972; Pattison, DeFrancisco, Wood, & Crowder, 1975).

The hypothesis that a high density network involving evaluative judgments by peers can promote behavior of a paranoid nature was addressed by the present research. The likelihood of independent interactions among members and the pressures of normative expectations in a high density group may intensify anxiety in a stressful situation by promoting the expectation of criticism and rejection by others over which the individual has no control, and thereby precipitate paranoid behavior. Thus, it was predicted that subjects in a high density condition would demonstrate greater defensiveness, anxiety, projection, and guardedness concerning self-disclosure than subjects in a low density condition.

Subjects

Sixty male students in introductory psychology classes participated in the study. They were tested in six groups of ten, with thirty subjects in each of the two experimental conditions.

Procedure

The purpose of the experiment presented to the subjects was to study the characteristics of people who are effective in small group problem solving and decision-making tasks. After being informed that only eight of the ten subjects could participate in

a group exercise requiring human relations skills, subjects were presented instructions on how to gather data used to determine which two group members would be excluded from working on the group exercise. Subjects were told that they were to consider each person's relationships with his parents, relationships with other men, relationships with women, and personal adequacy in order to decide which members of the experimental group were best qualified to work on the problem. They were given a series of questions to use in the interviews and a rating scale to evaluate each member with whom they spoke. The high and low density conditions were introduced via differential instructions about the procedures subjects would follow in order to evaluate each group member's suitability for working on the group problem.

In the high density condition, subjects were instructed to meet in rotating pairs of two to evaluate themselves and the other group members, and they were led to believe that they would be evaluated by the other group members in their absence. They were told that on the basis of these discussions, they would assign a rating to each person, and that the ratings would be tallied in order to identify the members of the group who would be excluded from working on the group problem. In this condition, subjects were led to expect a high degree of interaction between group members and were told that each should expect to be evaluated and discussed by others in his absence.

In the low density condition, subjects were told that one member would be chosen to privately interview each person and evaluate his suitability for working on the group problem while

the rest of the group members worked silently on some practice problems. Each subject was led to believe that he was the person chosen to interview and rate the others. Subjects did not expect to be questioned or evaluated by the other members of the group, nor did they expect the other group members to have contact with one another in their absence. Further, subjects were led to believe that their own suitability for working on the group problem would be assessed on the basis of their personal self-evaluations and recommendations to the experimenter, who would make the final determination of who would be excluded.

Dependent Measures

The dependent measures for this study were selected and designed to assess defensiveness, state anxiety, projection, and self-disclosure. The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne and Marlowe, 1964) was used to assess defensiveness. and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, A-State Scale (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970) was chosen as the measure of anxiety. The projection measure was comprised of an adjective checklist that was administered twice with different instructions each time. First, prior to the introduction of the above experimental conditions, subjects were asked to complete the 48-item checklist by selecting the ten adjectives that applied to them of which they were "most proud" and the ten of which they were "least proud." Following the introduction of the experimental condition, subjects were asked to respond to the identical checklist by placing a number from zero to 100 next to each adjective indicating the percentage of college students they have met whom they would

describe by that word. The extent to which subjects attributed negatively valued self-characteristics to others constituted the measure of projection.

Two measures were used to assess self-disclosure. The first measure assessed the subject's reported willingness to self-disclose based on items selected from one of Jourard's (1971) questionnaires. All items selected were rated high in intimacy value. The second measure involved actual self-disclosure. Subjects were asked to respond to four open-ended questions and were encouraged to answer as honestly as possible. No time limit was set for completing these questions, but the length of their answers was implied by the space allotted for them on the paper they were given.

Based on the above measures, seven scores were used to test the hypotheses. These were defensiveness, state anxiety, projection, willingness to self-disclose, and three scores of actual self-disclosure based on the self-descriptive essays which were: 1) depth of self-disclosure, as determined by judgments of the content, 2) number of words written in the essays, and 3) number of omissions. A rating guide was developed for judging the depth of content and good reliability was determined between two independent raters using this guide.

Following administration of the dependent measures, subjects were informed that the peer evaluations and subsequent group problem would not take place, and they were debriefed concerning the actual purpose of the experiment.

Results

The means and standard deviations for high and low density

subjects' scores on the dependent variables in each replication can be found in Table 1. The means and standard deviations across replications for the two conditions are presented in Table 2. To determine if there were overall differences between subjects in the two conditions, a 2 X 3 multivariate analysis of variance was performed on the seven sets of scores. The results of this analysis indicated a significant main effect due to density, F (7,48) = 16.03, $p < .001$. The main effect for replications and the conditions by replications interaction were not significant.

Subsequent univariate analyses of variance were carried out on each of the dependent measures. These results are also presented in Table 2.

The results on defensiveness indicated no significant differences between conditions on social desirability scores. As predicted, there was a significant main effect for density on anxiety and projection scores, while the main effect for replications and conditions by replications were not significant. Subjects in the high density condition indicated greater degrees of anxiety ($\bar{X}$s 46.50 vs. 38.40) and projection ($\bar{X}$s 412.20 vs. 304.96) than subjects in the low density condition consistently across the three replications.

The results on self-disclosure were not consistent. No significant differences were found between conditions on reported willingness to self-disclose. In contrast, significance was found on all three measures of actual self-disclosure based on the self-descriptive essays. The responses of subjects in the high density conditions were rated as lower in depth of self-disclosure

($\bar{X}$s 13.40 vs. 22.73), consisted of less words ($\bar{X}$s 27.06 vs. 60.46), and had a larger number of omissions ($\bar{X}$s .66 vs. .03) than the responses of subjects in the low density condition.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that a high density situation can promote anxiety, projection, and guardedness concerning self-disclosure by subjecting the individual to a constricting environment that limits personal privacy and control. However, subjects in the high and low density conditions did not differ significantly in defensiveness or reported willingness to self-disclose.

The absence of significant differences between the high and low density conditions on the Social Desirability Scale raises the possibility that the type of defensiveness associated with paranoid reactions is different than the defensiveness measured by the Social Desirability Scale. As conceptualized by Crowne and Marlowe (1960), the defensiveness measured by this scale is regarded as a stable need to respond in culturally appropriate ways, or as a need for social approval. Paranoid defensiveness, on the other hand, appears to involve a self-protective attempt to deny personal inadequacies that the individual believes promotes vulnerability to criticism and rejection. Consequently, the defensiveness measured by the Social Desirability Scale may not apply to paranoid defensiveness.

Although the results of the analyses of the willingness to self-disclose data were nonsignificant, the related finding that subjects in the high density condition were significantly more guarded than subjects in the low density condition based on the measure of actual self-disclosure supports the general reasoning underlying this hypothesis. One explanation of the failure to find differences in willingness to self-disclose is that all subjects reported being willing to discuss highly personal areas in intimate detail. Thus, subjects may have overestimated their willingness to self-disclose. Perhaps the subjects actually considered revealing highly personal information, but when faced with a chance to do so refrained because revealing personal concerns would make them vulnerable to negative evaluations by others.

While the findings of this research suggest that high density networks may have a nagative impact on individual adaptation under stress, it seems possible that high density networks may in some instances reduce pathological stress-related reactions. Under many circumstances, a high density social network could be supportive and nonthreatening, as for example, when group members share a stressful experience. In an evaluative situation, however, such as the conditions introduced in this study, a high density social network is likely to exacerbate the fears of those in the group since information about them, along with possible criticisms and rejections, can occur from multiple sources without their knowledge or control.

It seems particularly important to identify the specific qualities of the social connections between group members when relating social network density to individual functioning. Social network connections are likely to vary widely with respect to affect as well as activities, and the variations in the nature and emotional tone of the connections in a social network can have an impact on the influence of density level on an individual's functioning. In the present research, the nature of the social connections were restricted to a particular type of activity and affective relationship, i.e., evaluation, stress, and intimate self-disclosure. Thus, the greater degrees of paranoid behavior demonstrated by high as opposed to low density subjects may be particular to situations in which social connections revolve around self-disclosure and evaluation of oneself by other people.

The social conditions created in this research represent a specific example of density which may be generalizable to naturally occurring periods of personal crisis. However, many other possible density conditions can exist. More information is needed about the effects of high and low density under a variety of conditions. Future research using variations in the current paradigm, as well as naturalistic studies of high and low density networks is recommended in order to extend the current understanding of the effects of density on individual adaptation, and more specifically, on paranoid behavior.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for High and Low Density Subjects' Responses to the Dependent Measures by Replication Groups

	High Density						Low Density					
	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 1		Group 2		Group 3	
Measures*	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
MC-SDS	14.3	3.9	16.6	7.1	15.0	5.0	13.2	6.4	15.6	4.9	14.8	2.8
STAI	49.1	9.0	46.4	8.4	44.0	5.1	39.6	7.9	37.7	6.2	37.9	5.7
PM	394.7	121.7	429.1	99.0	412.8	90.2	310.4	117.3	362.9	159.5	241.6	105.1
WSD	31.8	7.5	28.9	5.8	28.3	6.2	30.5	7.1	28.5	6.7	30.2	10.2
DSD	15.4	5.4	11.3	2.4	13.5	4.7	24.6	4.6	19.9	4.5	23.7	3.4
LSD	26.3	16.2	26.1	17.7	28.8	15.6	67.0	27.2	61.8	20.5	52.6	21.5
O	0.8	1.0	0.8	0.6	0.4	0.5	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

*The abbreviations of the dependent measures stand for the following:
MC-SDS = defensiveness (higher scores indicate greater defensiveness)
STAI = anxiety (higher scores indicate greater anxiety)
PM = projection (higher scores indicate greater projection)
WSD = willingness to self-disclose (higher scores indicate greater willingness to self-disclose)
DSD = depth of self-disclosure (higher scores indicate greater depth of self-disclosure)
LSD = length of self-disclosure (higher scores indicate greater breadth of self-disclosure)
O = omissions (higher scores indicate greater omissions)

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Univariate Fs Between High Density and Low Density Subjects' Responses to the Dependent Measures

Measure	High Density (N = 30)		Low Density (N = 30)		F(1, 54)
	M	SD	M	SD	
Defensiveness	15.3	5.45	14.53	4.89	.318
Anxiety	46.5	7.74	38.4	6.48	18.921*
Projection	412.2	101.88	304.96	134.73	12.459*
Willingness to Self-Disclose	29.66	6.56	29.73	7.96	.001
Depth of Self-Disclosure	13.4	4.6	22.73	4.57	69.559*
Length of Self-Disclosure	27.06	16.06	60.46	23.30	40.857*
Omissions	.66	.75	.03	.18	19.691*

* $p < .001$

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